

The Loire in a Glass

Exploring France's great river of white wines
from Muscadet to Sancerre

BY ROGER MORRIS

Start at its mouth, where the mighty Loire River ends its east-to-west journey across the heart of France. Here, where the Atlantic Ocean washes the rough-hewn shores of venerable Brittany, grab a wine glass—a white one—and let's make our way upstream. It's time to explore.

Although the Loire Valley (pronounced LWAHR) produces very good red wines such as the Cabernet Franc of Chinon and Bourgueil and the pink Rosé d'Anjou, it is best known for its white wines made from a variety of grapes in a variety of styles. Altogether, the Loire Valley produces about 420 million bottles of wine annually from 61 different appellations and denominations. Of those that reach the United States, about 75 percent are white wines and another 5 percent are sparkling.

This emphasis on white wines is partly because the Loire Valley is historically cooler than the Rhône Valley, Bordeaux and the Beaune region of Burgundy. Hot-weather grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Grenache have difficulty ripening completely, while more varieties of white grapes can get fully mature, as they generally have shorter growing seasons. Global warming has lessened this difference somewhat, but it still generally holds true.

The distance from the mouth of the Loire River to Sancerre is about 250 miles—and it's all grape-growing territory. Although there are several varieties of white grapes grown along this vast stretch of river and its tributaries, the primary ones are Melon de Bourgogne, Chenin Blanc and Sauvignon Blanc. Here, we take a look at them grouped around the major cities as we travel up the Loire River.



LOIRE VALLEY

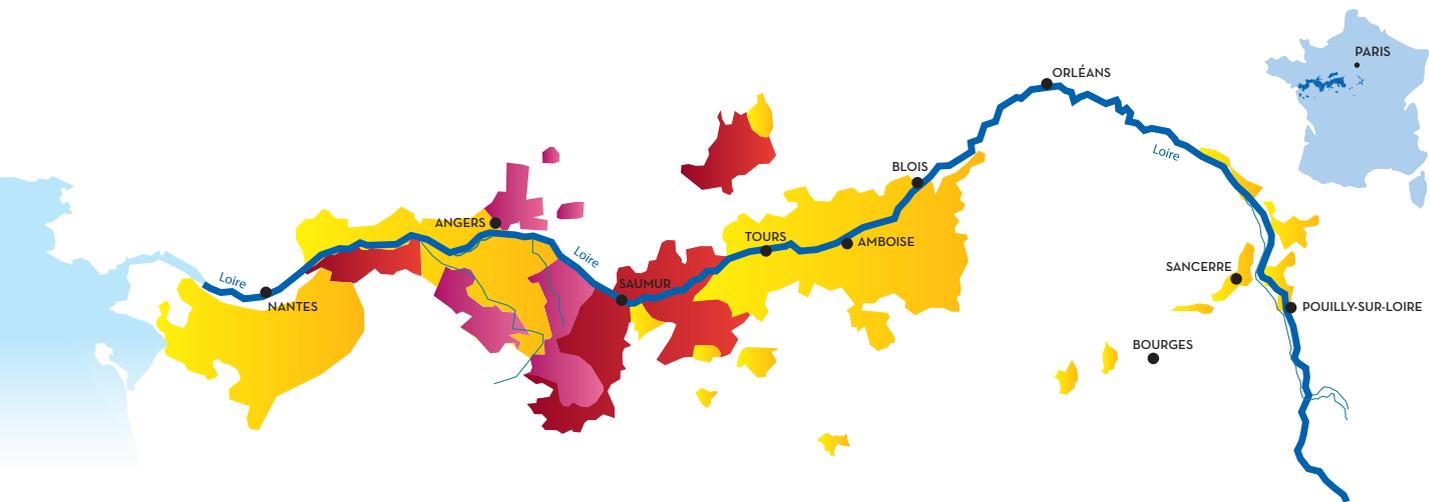
NANTES

Unlike the Rhône, the Loire is a very broad river valley with few mountains or stretches of canyons. This is historically prime farming territory—and not just for grapes. The Loire Valley is also well known for its châteaux, castles and country estates. It's a great place for tourists and folks who like to ride their bikes through beautiful, but not too challenging, countryside.

Nantes is a few miles upstream from the Atlantic, and the region west and east of it is Muscadet territory, especially south of the river. Melon de Bourgogne is the primary grape of the region, and Muscadet has long been known as the wine for shellfish, especially raw oysters, rivaling the more expensive Chablis of Burgundy. Muscadet is further divided into sub-regions, the most prominent of which is Muscadet Sèvres-et-Maines, southeast of Nantes, where about 70 percent of the vineyards are located.

Éric Chevalier is one of the more progressive winemakers in the Nantes region and produces wine under his Domaine de l'Aujardière label. "The Atlantic affects our wine-growing very much with warm weather, thanks to the Gulf Stream, and winds," he says. "It gives the wine a taste of salt and iodine!"

Like many smaller growers here, Chevalier says he is struggling to compete with large-scale producers who keep prices low, which is great for consumers, but bad for small producers. "The work is not easy," he says. "Perhaps customers need a bigger price to believe more in our product!" Winemakers in Muscadet country are also being attracted to growing grapes other than Melon, although they must call these wines Vin de Pays du Val de Loire. These include the spicy Sauvignon Gris, Fié Gris (the local name for Sauvignon Blanc) and especially Chardonnay. According to Chevalier, the Chardonnay does not taste like Chablis or Mâcon, but instead is "'Chardonnay Oceanic'—fine, salty, light and iodine."



ANGERS

We pass briefly through Anjou, known primarily for its famous, somewhat sweet rosés, on our way to Angers. Here begins the rise of Chenin Blanc, known locally as Pineau de la Loire, the great grape of the lower Loire that produces dry, sweet and sparkling wines.

Saumur is perhaps the best known of the local appellations. Saumur makes both white and red wines, but its sparkling wine—mousseux—made from Chenin Blanc with up to 10 percent Chardonnay to give it acidity, has been its go-to wine.

Perhaps even more interesting is its Savennières region, a small stretch of southward-facing slopes on the north side of the river that produce perhaps the best, most structured and longest-aging dry Chenin Blancs in the Loire. It has two single-vineyard appellations—rare in France—most notably La Coulée de Serrant. In addition to making very good wines (though they vary greatly according to vintage) this is home base for Nicolas Joly, the man who has done the most to advance the cause of biodynamic growing.

Biodynamics is a viticulture that blends elements of organic growing with traditional elements of celestial orientation, especially lunar

phases. Initially looked at with some humor (one practice calls for cow manure to be buried in a horn), biodynamics today is popular with some of the best-known wineries in the world, especially in Bordeaux.

The sweet wines made from Chenin Blanc were once better known than they are today since the world drinks more dry dinner wines than it does sweet dessert ones—but they are still formidable wines for those who will take the time to sip them. Chief among these are the lovely Quarts de Chaume and Coteaux du Layon. (As a side note—just upriver before we reach Tours are two regions that make the best red wines, primarily from Cabernet Franc, in the Loire Valley—Chinon and Bourgeuil.)

TOURS

This is the heart of Chenin Blanc country—not just for the Loire Valley and France, but also for the world. Napa Valley once made a distinctive style of Chenin Blanc until most vines were rooted out to plant the more popular Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Sauvignon Blanc. South Africa makes its style of Chenin as well, which is one that is growing in stature.



CHATEAU DE MONTGOUVERNE
IN VOUVRAY



PHOTOS AND MAP COURTESY OF INTER-LOIRE

PAIRING: ARTEM SHADRIN / FOTOLIA.COM

Just below Tours, the Cher River splits off and takes a southeasterly path somewhat parallel to the Loire. Its wines, the best of which are farther upstream, are considered to be part of the greater Loire appellation.

Just east of the city, the hills begin to converge, and travelers are treated to a strange sight—hillside caves for houses, wineries and even large wine warehouses carved out of the tuffeau, a soft limestone that also gives acidity and structure to the Vouvray that is made here. Vouvray can be honeyed sweet wine, floral sparkling wine and relatively crisp dry wine. “We have the cool weather of the Loire River which gives us a wine that is not too heavy and which has minerality,” says François Chanier of Le Clos de Nouys.

Not as famous yet as Vouvray but increasingly held in high esteem is the Chenin Blanc of Montlouis-sur-Loire, situated between the Loire and the Cher and located just opposite Vouvray, which is on the north bank. Tours is also the beginning of Sauvignon Blanc country, as the Touraine whites are often good values in the production of Sauvignon Blanc.

SANCERRE AND POUILLY-SUR-LOIRE

After Orleans, a city not particularly known for stellar wine-making, the river takes a dip southward as we continue upstream. There are no large cities in this region of the Loire, but there are plenty of great white wines made from Sauvignon Blanc, the most famous of which are named in French fashion after their hometowns: Sancerre after Sancerre on the western banks of the Loire and Pouilly-Fumé after Pouilly-Sur-Loire on the eastern side of the stream.

Thierry Redde, winemaker at Michel Redde, produces wines in both appellations. “The main difference between Sancerre and Pouilly is the geographic relief,” he explains. “While much of the Sancerre appellation is isolated on hillsides, the terroir of Pouilly is more undulating. In Pouilly-sur-Loire, the early morning mists provide a microclimate which aids in longer maturity for the grapes, imparting great complexity of aromas, length, minerality and persistence to our Pouilly-Fumé wines.”

Traveling southwest from Sancerre through the hills toward Bourges, we come across three more prominent Sauvignon Blanc regions—first, the increasingly popular Menetou-Salon and then Reuilly and Quincy along the Yèvre River, a tributary of the Cher.

There is usually less rain in Reuilly and Quincy than in Sancerre, temperatures are slightly higher, and the elevation is lower—all of which causes the grapes to ripen fully earlier. Another difference, which Denis Jamain of Domaine de Reuilly points out, is soil. “A large share of the Reuilly terroir is Kimmeridgian just like in Chablis,” he says, which gives added mineral characteristics.

An interesting side note is the increased plantings in this region of the Loire in Pinot Gris, which can be made into a white wine or into a rosé or orange wine if it is allowed to spend time on its skins, which contain a red-orange pigment.

Throughout the Loire, the 2015 vintage—the one that is just coming to market—was a good one for white wines, says Ginette Thomas of Domaine Thomas & Fils. “The winter was mild, one of the least-cold in 100 years,” she says, followed by a dry summer, then rains before harvest. “As a result, the whites are generous and elegant with complex aromas of white fruits.”

Increasingly warmer vintages with long dry periods have been a blessing to producers of Loire white wines, yielding riper wines with more floral characteristics and fuller body, but still good finishing acidity. All in all, fresh, well-structured wines that are great with many food pairings. ■

ROGER MORRIS WRITES ABOUT WINE, FOOD, LIFESTYLES, ART AND CULTURE, AND TRAVEL FOR ABOUT 20 PUBLICATIONS. HE TRAVELS SEVERAL TIMES A YEAR TO WINE REGIONS WORLDWIDE. HIS LATEST BOOK, THE BRANDYWINE BOOK OF THE SEASONS, IS ABOUT THE CULINARY TERROIR OF THE BRANDYWINE REGION. MORRIS AND HIS WIFE ELLA LIVE IN DELAWARE WITH THEIR MENAGERIE OF CATS.



PAIRING WITH LOIRE WHITES

Melon de Bourgogne wines of Muscadet Shellfish, especially raw oysters. Appetizers that have tart or vinegary flavors, such as smoked fish spreads and anchovies

Chenin Blanc dry wines of Vouvray, Savennières, Montlouis-sur-Loire, Saumur Freshwater fish, especially trout; light poultry in cream sauces; seafood salads

Sweet Chenin Blanc of Vouvray, Quarts de Chaume, Coteaux du Layon Fresh fruits, dessert tarts, cow’s milk cheeses

Sparkling Chenin Blanc of Vouvray Caviar, poultry dishes without sauces and light Italian fare such as savory focaccia spread with olives or creamy cannoli to finish a meal

Sauvignon Blanc of Sancerre, Pouilly-Fumé, Reuilly, Quincy, Menetou-Salon Ocean fish, salads with meats, quiche and other cheese-based dishes, heavier poultry dishes